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Formation as Discipleship through the example of a Missionary Society

Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers)

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1. Introduction

Like most of the Missionary Societies, we too the Missionaries of Africa have a formal formation programme, part of which is demanded by Rome. But, we also have another formation programme specific to us which I would call the 'informal and family programme'. This latter programme corresponds to our *identity and Spirit* as Missionaries of Africa which we inherited from our Founder Charles Cardinal Lavignerie and our predecessors in the Society in whose footsteps we follow. This informal family programme contains our *charism and core values*, and it is for us the foundation of the formal seminary programme. It is this informal programme which empowers us even after the seminary formation to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with the world in general, but specifically with Africa and the African World.

2. Main Characteristics of our Informal Formation Programme

i) *Life of the Society*

This essentially includes the life and commitments of our Founder (Father), Charles Cardinal Lavignerie, and the major missionary orientations. Our founder's passion, love and commitment for Africa remain one of the major sources of our missionary inspiration.

"I loved everything connected with Africa, her past, her future, her mountains, her pure sky, her sun, the great lines of her desert." (Lavignerie, Instructions, 27th March 1884)

ii) *Official and Popular Names of the Society*

Our official name is: *Society of the Missionaries of Africa*. This name spells out our field of missionary activities (our battle field). These words of our Founder clearly expresses it:

"The Society has in fact a specific aim which it may never lose sight of without losing its very reason of existing. That aim is, to be directed towards the non-Christian people of Africa. The Society may not undertake any work which is not connected with that aim." (Circular Letter of November, 1874)

This implies that our formal formation programme has to be connected with Africa and the African world. It is for this reason that most of our formation houses are in Africa.

Our popular name is *White Fathers* and for our female branch the *White Sisters*. We got this name because of our official 'habit' (dress) which is the traditional white *gandoura* (*cassock*), the dress of the Arabs. On this

we added the cape *bermous*), red-hat (*cechia*) and the rosary around the neck, which also resembles the 'Muslim rosary' (*tasbib*).

The reason for choosing this as the 'official habit' was *inculturation* among the people with whom we are living and working. Our Founder even gave permission to change this habit in other places if need be and only keep the rosary because of our being dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus, (Our Lady of Africa).

iii) *Community Life*

We live and work in community and the ideal community should be at least three members. Community¹ is a privileged place for bearing witness together to the values of the Kingdom of God.

"Love each other, remain united in heart and thought. Form truly a single family. Have a strong *esprit de corps*, in the Christian sense of the term. Defend each other, support each other, help each other always. May discord never find a place among you. In a word, be not only united, but one." (Circular Letter 11 November 1874)

One of the kingdom values which has been taken as our motto is charity (*caritas*). And, we have as symbol for this motto the Pelican feeding its young ones with its blood.

iv) *Inculturation: "Be all things to all"*

The first step in our effort of inculturation in any place where we are sent is learning the local language because this is the key to enter into the culture of the people.

"The Society has also its own specific method for achieving its aim. That method consists in drawing near to the native peoples of Africa by adopting their exterior manner of life: their language in the first place, but also their dress and their food, according to the example of the Apostle: *Omnibus omnia factus sum ut omnes facerem salvos*: I have become all things to all men so that I may save all" (1 Cor. 9: 22). (Circular Letter of November, 1874)

v) *Internationality*

From the beginning, our founder wanted an international society.

"It is my ambition that in speaking of your little Society, which by its origins is the humblest and the last in the line of Missionary Societies, it is said of it that at least it is Catholic above all else." (Missionary Send-Off, 9th Caravan)

All our formation houses, at least after philosophy, are international.

vi) *Interreligious and Ecumenical Dialogue*

The Society of the Missionaries of Africa was founded in Algiers, Algeria in 1868². The cultural, social and religious context was Islamic and therefore *interreligious dialogue*, specifically *Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, became part of our identity and mission. *Ecumenical dialogue* also became part of our missionary involvement when we opened a community in Jerusalem in 1878.

¹ It is even better when this community is international, interracial and intercultural.

² The following year, 1869, a female institute, the 'Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa' (MSOLA).

vii) Commitment to Social Justice

One of the activities in which the first missionaries had to be involved in was the fight against the slave trade in Africa. The founder himself was very much involved in this struggle (1888-1889) in Europe. His catchword in this campaign against slave trade was : *"I am a man and nothing human is foreign to me....."* And in his address to the pioneer missionaries to Equatorial Africa he exhorted them in these words:

"Go, my sons, go to teach them this doctrine. Tell them that this Jesus died for them on the cross, in order to carry all these freedoms to the world: freedom of souls against the yoke of evil, freedom of people against the yoke of tyranny, freedom of consciences against the yoke of persecutors, freedom of body against the yoke of slavery." (*Algiers, 20th June, 1879*)

In our formation programme, our candidates have to follow courses that would inspire, challenge and equip them for this type of ministry.

3. Structure and Content of our Formal Formation Programme

i) Initial formation

We have different 'phases' through which a future missionary of Africa has to go through before making his final (perpetual) missionary oath, in other words, before he becomes a full member of the Society. These are:

- Come-and-See sessions which last between one week and one month.
- Pre-seminary phase which lasts from six to nine months.
- First Phase (3years) mainly: philosophical, human, social and religious studies
- Second Phase (One Year): Spiritual year (Novitiate) - Reflection and Prayer; deeper attachment to the person of Christ; introduction to the life of the Society (history and major missionary orientations).
- Third Phase (2 years): Apostolic training – initiation into missionary life especially in Africa, outside one's home country. Study of language and culture of the people is key in this phase.
- Fourth Phase (3-4 Years): intellectual, professional and apostolic formation.

In all these stages, there are some common elements: Team⁴ / community life, spiritual and prayer life, deepening the knowledge and spirit of the Founder and the Society, and pastoral involvement.

The programme aims at an integral formation which caters for the academic, human, spiritual and professional needs of the candidates and mission. It also aims at promoting the growth of the individual and the community.

ii) Ongoing formation

This programme is designed to help the members who have made their perpetual missionary oath, to deal adequately with the different stages of their missionary experiences and human development. "The primary responsibility for ongoing formation rests with each individual missionary". (Constitutions and Laws # 145)

4. Challenges to our Formation Programme

Among the many challenges to our formation programme, I would like to mention three:

³ Quote from Terence 195/185 - 159 BC.

⁴ In formation houses, there are teams. Each team has a formator and the role of the formator in the team could be compared to that of Jesus with the disciples of Emmaus.

- i) **Clericalism** whose root cause is the weak ‘ecclesiology and missiology’ and the religious context from which our candidates come and where they will eventually be working.
- ii) **Religious fundamentalism:** Again, this is mainly from the influence of the religious context in which our candidates come from and where they will be working. Religious fundamentalism is contrary to our interreligious / ecumenical dialogue and openness considered to be part of our heritage from the time of the Founder.
- iii) **Fear to commit oneself to work for Justice and Peace:** “The earthen vessels” of the contemporary generation in which we carry the message seem to be more fragile than that of our founder and predecessors, and therefore very fearful to be involved in this prophetic ministry. It is one thing to know and have the skills for this ministry, it is another to have the passion and the courage to be involved in it, whatever the cost.

5. CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude with a quote from our Constitutions and Laws (CL), Chapter on Formation:

“Called to be witnesses to the Gospel, we want, like the Apostles, to be trained by Christ. Formation is above all else a work of grace, but calls for a constant effort on our part to be faithful to the Spirit and to become interiorly free. **Prayer, study, experience**, these are the main elements of our formation, which is never completed. It prepares us and makes us constantly better fitted for our task, taking into account both the present and the future needs of the mission in Africa.”
(CL 2018, #107)